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ART REVIEW

The faces of this place

Artists and art reflect diversity amid a turbulent world in the Orange County Museum of Art's estimable survey.

By Christopher Knight
Times Staff Writer

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THE 2006 CALIFORNIA BIENNIAL On preview day for the 2006 California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art, the headline in the newspaper said: "Legal Battle Over Detainee Bill Likely." The story chronicled the nearly unimaginable national debate underway over the constitutionality of military tribunals conducted without federal court oversight and the torture of prisoners.

Today's topsy-turvy world is a powerful undercurrent in OCMA's gratifying biennial survey exhibition, which presents 127 works in every conceivable medium by three dozen artists from throughout the state. (Twenty artists are based in Los Angeles, 11 in the Bay Area and five in other parts of California.) Few works are explicit in addressing topical events, as was common in the often jejune social and political art of the early 1990s. Instead, many contemplate modern political conditions in a more plangent sense, as a complex network of social relations involving authority or power.

For a show in which just six artists are older than 35, the 1960s emerge as a surprising — and revealing — touchstone. The show resonates with references to an era of failed and hubristic foreign war, aggressive expansion of civil rights at home and the emergence of a mature American art world attempting to shake off monolithic thinking.

"Kalifornia Über Alles," a sly two-channel video sculpture by Joel Morrison, stacks one black video monitor atop another. The bottom screen glows blank. The top screen loops a clip from Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 thriller, "The Birds," in which scores of black crows silently alight on a schoolyard jungle gym behind an oblivious but nervously smoking Tippi Hedren.

Hitchcock films by now constitute an entire subgenre of artists' source material, and it's hard to find something fresh to do with them. Morrison has. One clue is the title, which riffs on the first song recorded by the Dead Kennedys.

Morrison digitally erased the jungle gym onto which the birds ominously descend. He replaced it with a modular cubic sculpture by Sol LeWitt, also from the 1960s. "Kalifornia Über Alles" turns Hitchcock's Atomic Age Cold War scenario away from a pop-narrative of nature's revenge, released in the year of the Kennedy assassination. It becomes instead a provocative story of culture's retribution. The image echoes in the present, when '60s ideals lie in a shambles.

My Barbarian, the inventive performance troupe whose principal members are Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon and Alexandro Segade, has made a video projected in a darkened museum gallery, where a large blanket spread out on the floor is suggestively strewn with lounging pillows. Eccentric and often funny, the video recalls the 1968 rock musical "Hair," about soulful peace-and-love in the rainbow family of humanity.

Largely plot-free, the revue is satirical but serious. The Age of Aquarius is cast as today's

equivalent to the mythic Golden Age of pre-classical antiquity, which once fueled artists like Cézanne and Gauguin. Given the repressive religiosity tearing apart today's world, paganism emerges as a reasonable, supernatural-free alternative. Sign me up.

Color-field painting, long dismissed as the losing genre in the 1960s battle that saw Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual art emerge triumphant, has been an inspiration to numerous artists in recent years. (Discredited art often serves that purpose.) Jane Callister is among the revisionists' most accomplished practitioners.

In addition to several fine canvases that insert shark-like fins into a Pepto-Bismol-colored primordial soup, she created an immense wall painting composed from blotches, splashes and swoops of brightly colored acrylic. They're painted on irregular pieces of transparent adhesive film and dispersed across the wall. The exuberant mural — free-form color suspended in contained shards — is simultaneously irrational and thoughtfully considered.

Similarly high-spirited is Tim Sullivan's do-it-yourself special-effects art, especially a video in which he and a friend soar over San Francisco in a bright red roller-coaster car. The playful "Magic Carpet Ride," like the 1968 Steppenwolf song, makes one long for another Summer of Love — while giving new meaning to current nutty notions of cultural tourism.

Binh Danh, born in Vietnam in 1977 during the noxious reign of the Khmer Rouge in neighboring Cambodia, has made an installation based on the famous 1969 issue of Life magazine that recorded "one week's dead" during the Vietnam War. In a conflict that Vietnamese call the American War, the 242 casualties Life depicted were American. That dichotomy is poetically evoked in found photographs that the artist turns into negatives and then prints with sunlight on leaves and natural fibers.

When U.S. Olympic sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists on the medal platform in the 1968 Mexico City Games, they created a memorable nonviolent protest against their country's abrogation of civil rights. Hank Willis Thomas records a similar black-power gesture with a tall, free-standing photographic cutout. But it doesn't show the muscled arm of an athlete or a fist inside a black glove.

Instead, the arm of a natty business suit with an expensive wristwatch rearranges the salute, making it a demanding emblem of economic power. Another Thomas photograph shows a black man's skull scarified with a Nike "swoosh." The head, branded with that abstracted wing, morphs into Mercury, god of speed — and commerce.

Not all the biennial's most compelling works have clear roots in the 1960s. Walead Beshty's suite of tall, lush landscape photographs seems to record natural garden paradises. Look closely, though, and things are a bit too groomed, cramped and organized. The scenes turn out to be plantings along L.A. freeways and interchanges — bits of hoped-for heaven, wedged into highway hell.

Likewise, Sterling Ruby's "stalagmite monument" — a twin-tower made of PVC pipe covered in dripping, oozing, screaming-orange polyurethane stabilized by a wooden brace stamped "fait accompli" — is a rousing contradiction in terms. The phallic structure rising overhead is a pillar at the brink of collapse, an ancient natural form rendered in the starkest modern terms of plastic artifice. It's the weirdest thing in the show, and among the best.

So is the hypnotizing video by the team of Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, who go by the appellation the Speculative Archive. The pair hasn't shown much in L.A., where they now live, but the video's sequence of short, independent yet related scenes is a knockout. It's a rare video that successfully builds on Bruce Nauman's classic camera works exploiting body language.

Featured is a young, bearded, dark-eyed Syrian man, seated before a white screen and facing the camera. In one scene, he begins by seductively blowing kisses at the lens, and through it to the viewer. Slowly, the hand gestures become more insistent, until finally they're flat-out violent. It's as if he will literally love you to death.

In another, his hand swipes his face to close his eyes, almost in the manner of a mortician with a corpse. But soon the eyes pop open again — only to have the highly ritualized sequence repeat, over and over.

The repetition becomes a commanding but poignant image of mortality and renewal over time. An insistent will to live meets the inescapable fact of death. In the context of today's Middle East conflagration, a wholly unexpected socio-political resonance bubbles up.

Curators Elizabeth Armstrong, Karen Moss and Rita Gonzalez have filled the entire museum with this biennial, which is the second installment since OCMA decided to make the ongoing event a major part of its program. We should be glad they did. It's a pitch-perfect show, worth spending time with.

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2006 California Biennial

Where: Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays and until 8 p.m. on Thursdays

Ends: Dec. 31

Price: \$8 to \$10

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